

Wesley United Methodist
October 16, 2016
Text: 2 Timothy 3:14-4:5
Luke 18:1-8

Title: Break My Heart for What Breaks Yours – Keep on Praying

So many of our hymns of prayer are like the one we just sang, quiet, meditative. I believe every word of what we just sang, I believe that we do often forfeit peace in our lives and carry around extra pain because we do not take everything to God in prayer. At the same time, when we think about really taking everything to God in prayer, I suspect that much of our prayer or our way of expressing it to God would not be quiet and meditative. “Are we weak and heavy laden, cumbered with a load of care? ... Do thy friends despise, forsake thee? Take it to the Lord in prayer!”

A couple of years ago, along with about 30 others, I spent 10 days in South Korea guests of a very large Methodist Church there. One of the things that really affected me was their early morning prayer service. At 5:00 am every morning we were in the sanctuary along with about 500 others. (I told you it was a large church.) After some singing and a teaching, the congregation went into prayer for about 30-45 minutes with people leaving when they were finished praying. Prayer in the Korean church is very different than it is in most of the churches with which we are familiar.

Everyone is praying at the same time, and praying out loud. At first it was hard for me to get used to, but after a couple of days, I also discovered a sense of freedom. At first I was self-conscious, aware of the voices next to me, but quickly I stopped even being aware of the other voices because the noise level made it easy to pray with passion and energy.

Think about it, if we were talking with a friend about our sadness or frustration at friends disappointing us our voice would hardly be soft, reverent, and meditative. If we were telling a friend about the things we are most worried about, the things that are heavy burdens, we would likely have inflection in our voice expressing the emotions. Why should it be any different when we talk with God?

I'm hopeful that in our personal prayers, we do feel the freedom to talk with God the way we would talk with a good friend. I hope that we feel free to really share our emotions with God. If you think about it, God already knows our feelings, so why should we try to hide them? Why should we think we need to hide our feelings and our true thoughts from the God who already knows them and who loves us so much?

I think this is why Jesus' story in today's Gospel about the need to pray is a story of passion, persistence, anything but quiet and meditative. The woman in the story or parable is passionate. She has been cheated; she is angry and she wants justice. She doesn't come to the judge meekly and politely and ready to go away when the judge says no. She comes over and over again, until finally her petition is granted.

This woman is a widow. In Jesus' culture, this meant that she likely had no one to help her, no one to plead her case. She is the symbol of all who are poor and defenseless. In 1st century Judean culture, there was no one more vulnerable to poverty and exploitation than a widow with no surviving sons.

The judge in this story is not a Jewish judge. In Jewish culture a case would be decided by three judges: one chosen by the person bringing the complaint, one by the person being accused and one impartial judge. This

judge would have been a paid magistrate – typically someone notorious and influenced by money and bribes.

By the way, in our reading, we hear the judge say, “while I have no fear of God”, this is one of those cases where the meaning of words has changed through the years and the meaning of words in the Bible may be somewhat different than what we would immediately expect. In the Bible, the word “fear” especially when used about God has to do with being in awe of God, not “dreading” or being afraid of God. So this judge is saying that he doesn’t care about either God or other people. Still, just as water can wear away stone, the widow’s constant pleas for justice penetrated the judge’s indifference.

This is the setting that Jesus uses to talk about the need to be persistent in prayer.

Let’s be very clear, here. Jesus is not comparing God to the corrupt judge who doesn’t care anything about what God or other people think. When Jesus talks about always praying and not losing heart, he is not saying that if we badger God then eventually, like the judge, God will give up and grant our requests.

Rather, Jesus is using a familiar rabbinical method of moving from lesser to greater. If this corrupt judge will respond to the consistency of someone coming to him, **how much more** will God respond to the needs of God’s people. At the same time, we do know that sometimes the answer to our petitions is “no” or “not yet”. Just as good parents know that sometimes we need to say “no” to our children’s requests, sometimes God’s response is not what we want or think we need in that very moment.

I believe the whole point of this parable is that because we know that God hears our pleas; because we know that God is faithful we can persist

in faith even if (and maybe especially if) the current circumstances are not what we want.

The widow prays in the great biblical and Jewish tradition of prayer being bold enough to challenge God on a matter of justice because of the deep covenantal relationship of trust with God. When we argue with God as the widow did with the judge, as Abraham, Moses, and Job argued with God, it is a way of praying that allows us to be honest with God – and again, why not, since God is the one with whom all desires are known and from whom no secrets are hid.ⁱ It only makes sense for us to be perfectly honest and transparent with God in our prayers.

So, if God is not like the judge in this story who needs to be worn down by our prayers; if God is not keeping count of the number of prayers that come waiting for us to hit the magic number before our plea is granted, why, then, is it so important for us to “pray always and not to lose heart.” I think this has more to do with us than it does with God. Last week in the reading from the letter to Timothy we heard and proclaimed that even if we are faithfulness, God remains faithful. God is faithful but it is we who need to be reminded.

One of the reasons that it is so important for us to pray is so that when tragedies happen in our lives – and they will – we already have a strong confidence in God’s faithfulness. As Paul wrote from prison to the young preacher Timothy, “continue in what you have learned and firmly believed.” We already know that God is with us; we are not alone and that God will give us the strength to get through whatever has happened even if it doesn’t seem so at the time.

It is much more difficult for people who have never known God or have turned their backs or have forgotten about God to believe that God

can and will help them through the challenges and crises in their lives. When there is already an active faith at work, faith that is lived out on a daily basis, then hope can remain alive. Then we are able to sing, even with shaky voices, “O God, our help in ages past, our hope for years to come, our shelter from the storm blast and our eternal home.”ⁱⁱ

There is another important thing to pay attention to in this parable that Jesus told about prayer. Notice what the prayer of the widow is. “Grant me justice against my opponent.” She is not asking for something that she simply wants to make her life easier. She is not asking for favors or possessions, she is asking for justice. She wants a wrong to be made right. At the end of the parable, Jesus says, “And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them.”

Justice is social love in action. Justice is seeking what is fair and honorable for those who most often are denied it. It is no coincidence that the person pleading for justice in this parable is a widow, a person who in Jesus’ culture was the most vulnerable to poverty, exploitation, and injustice. For those hearing Jesus’ story there would have been anger and outrage that the vulnerability of this widow was being exploited by someone. You can almost hear the crowd shouting with joy when the judge finally decides to grant her justice, even if it was for his convenience rather than because of his concern for her.

When we hear about hurricanes and over a thousand dead in Haiti and 44 dead in the United States, our heart breaks – or it should. There is, sadly, a danger known as “compassion fatigue” where we become exposed repeatedly to so many horrible things that we start to protect ourselves by comparing tragedies with others or paying closer attention to the ones near

us or that involve people we know. It is a reality and probably one that is necessary in some respect to prevent us from becoming paralyzed by all that is going wrong around us. Still, as with the need to pray always so that we are always aware of God's faithfulness, I believe that the more we pray seeking to be more like God wants us to be, the more we will also find our hearts breaking for the things that break God's heart, for the needs around us. We learn how to continue our lives trusting in God and knowing that we cannot do everything, but we can do something.

I have told you about Sammy, whose heart was broken by another 12- year old girl needing heart surgery, and how through Sammy's prayers and actions a church and community were mobilized and a child's life was saved. One child living in a country where there was not even one functioning EKG machine. One child who soon wanted to know about this Jesus that was the reason why people half way across the world were trying to help her.

Unfortunately, Safiatu lived in a country and area where there was not sufficient medical infrastructure and resources to keep her healthy after surgery. After another long road, Safiatu was adopted by Sammy's family. She lives here in Rhode Island and just before I left the North Kingstown Church a little more than 8 years ago, I had the great joy of baptizing Safiatu. She came to me one Sunday and told me that she wanted to be baptized. I asked her what that meant to her and she said, "Jesus choose me, now I choose Jesus." I don't think I have ever heard a better response and I will always remember the joy that day and the great thrill in being able to baptize this child of God who was with us because another child of God recognized the privilege she had by living in this country, had her heart broken by the injustice and filled with love did not give up until Safiatu was

able to be in a place where she could live a full and healthy life and thrive as a beloved child of God. Safiatu is now a beautiful young woman, a student at a college in the Boston area and bearing witness to the great love of God that is growing in her because another child who could have been ignored was not. Instead justice, love in action came to Safiatu and her life has become a witness to the faithfulness of God.

We seldom know the results of our prayers for justice. We generally do not know about the people whose lives are changed because we have responded to a need. But God knows and God is faithful and encouraging us to pray always and not to lose heart, to have our hearts broken and called to action whenever and wherever we encounter injustice.

“The Early church certainly prayed for many things it did not receive: safety, protection from persecution... It **did** receive what it most needed: a sense of God’s loving presence and attentiveness, and the strength and resilience and fortitude it needed to survive.

“We can count on God to come down on the side of justice. Count on God to hear the ones who have no power, no influence, no voice. Count on God to hear those who have nowhere else to turn. Count on God not always to grant your requests, but to hear, with loving parental patience, the persistent prayers of your heart.”ⁱⁱⁱ

May our hearts be broken by what breaks Gods and may we keep on praying and working for the fullness of God’s love and justice. May our faith continue to be strengthened and deepened as we continue to be open to God and continue to pray. Amen.

ⁱ Preaching the Gospel without blaming the Jews

ⁱⁱ Feasting on the Word

ⁱⁱⁱ Feasting on the Word